

AIRMEN ★★ OF ★★ MERCY



Tsunami brought in killer waves, death and destruction. It also clawed at the hearts and minds of the U.S. military who volunteered aid in the aftermath.

by Master Sgt. Orville F. Desjarlais Jr.
opening photo by Pfc. Nicholas T. Howes

It was strange how death visited Sri Lanka the day after Christmas.

It came with the tide, early in the morning, when children played with gifts, when men were either fishing or mending their nets to fish the next day. Women went about their daily chores. Those without jobs husked coconuts and sold them like soda.

As usual, a sea breeze blew through the palm trees and exotic birds whistled high-pitched tunes. Except, this morning was different. There were no elephants. The lack of animal carcasses after the disaster indicated they knew something was amiss. Some say the animals heard death rumbling across the ocean.

It arrived in a series of waves, called a tsunami. At around 7:30 a.m., deep underwater, two tectonic plates shifted just north of Simeulue Island, off the western coast of Sumatra, Indonesia. The India plate dove under the Burma plate some 50 feet, causing a fault line 750 miles long. The magnitude 9.0 earthquake, the largest recorded since the Good Friday earthquake off Alaska in 1964, triggered a series of 2-foot waves that traveled more than 250 mph.

The waves swelled 20 to 30 feet as they rumbled across 12 different countries' shores in the worst recorded tsunami in history. A 1703

by Master Sgt. Val Gempis



An elderly woman ponders her future as she sits in a relief camp after the devastating tsunami destroyed her village of Galle. Waves as high as 30 feet swept coastal areas of Sri Lanka. Thousands of homeless are now living in camps, schools and churches.

tsunami at Awa, Japan, that killed more than 100,000 people was the previous record holder.

By midmorning, an estimated 165,000 to 234,000 people died in Thailand, Sri Lanka, India, Malaysia and Indonesia. The killer waves prayed on the young and elderly. United Nation's Children Fund officials estimate between 70,000 and 80,000 children were killed. About 30 percent of all casualties were elderly. Because many of the bodies were swept out to sea, the true death toll may never be known.

"The carnage is of a scale that defies comprehension," said President George W. Bush on New Year's day. "As the people of this devastated region struggle to recover, we offer our love and compassion, and our assurance that America will be there to help."

Help came in the way of \$350 million in relief assistance and the U.S. military. As of Feb. 25, the Air Force had delivered 20 million pounds of relief supplies and equipment using helicopters, cargo and tanker aircraft. Kadena Air Base, Japan, and Andersen Air Force Base, Guam, deployed the bulk of Airmen who joined more than 11,500 military members across the region in Operation Unified Assistance. Yokota Air Base, Japan, and the U.S. Coast Guard supplied most of the C-130 cargo airlift.

The Navy delivered supplies in ship-to-shore operations that eliminated the need to use damaged or overcrowded airfields. The Marines helped clear debris and purify water in wells contaminated by salt water.

About midway through the deployment, Airman 1st Class Emily Starcher said, "It was a tremendous feeling to know we're playing a part in helping people put their lives back together."

"I feel proud to be a part of this mission. We're making a difference," said the HH-60 Pave Hawk helicopter flight engineer with the 33rd Rescue Squadron based at Kadena.

Edward Fox, a Senior U.S.

by Tech. Sgt. John M. Foster



Agency for International Development, said, "The thing that distinguishes the United States from the rest of the world is its military, especially the Air Force and its airlift capability."

He also said the helicopters were worth their weight in gold. But, you didn't have to tell that to Maj. Doug Hiestand, a 33rd Rescue Squadron HH-60 helicopter pilot and assistant operations officer during the operation.

He and the rest of his squadron helped feed and supply more than a million people left homeless on Sri Lanka's eastern and southern coasts. Those affected were in temporary shelters provided by local government officials, but the camps were difficult to get to because of washed out bridges and roads. Debris covered many roads, making them impassable. In many cases, helicopters were the only means by which to bring doctors, medicine, food and supplies to the camps.

One day, about three weeks after the disaster, the major landed in a clearing near the village

of Dampula, located in central Sri Lanka. The villagers loaded the helicopter with vegetables and salt and he hauled his precious load to Ampara, located close to the worst struck eastern area.

"I feel good about what I'm doing, but I just wish I could do more," he said when he landed at the end of the day.

It was a feeling shared by many who took part in the largest humanitarian relief effort since the Berlin Airlift. But they did what they could, and they did it proudly, according to Col. Mark Schissler. The 374th Air Expeditionary Wing commander, co-located with the combined Support Force 536 at Utapoa, Thailand, said most Airmen wore American flags on their sleeves.

"The people there knew [the American flag] represented capability," he said. "We were proud to be there and represent America in a region where people needed help. We are a reliable partner when trouble comes their way."

With the high threat of mosquito-transmitted diseases in Thailand, Staff

Sgt. Juan Rios studies mosquito larvae during the aftermath of the killer tsunami that struck there Dec. 26.

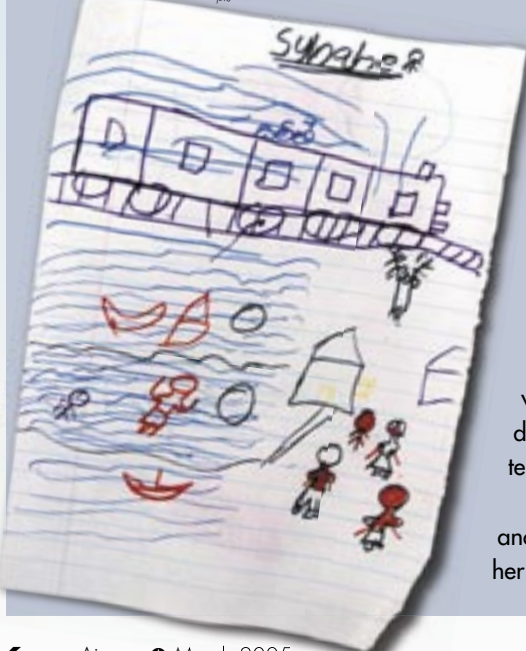
Survivors of the tsunami that struck Sumatra are overjoyed to see U.S. helicopters with food, cookies and water. Sailors from the USS Abraham Lincoln delivered supplies in ship-to-shore operations that eliminated the need to use damaged or overcrowded airfields during Operation Unified Assistance.

by Photographer's Mate 3rd Class H3 Jacob J. Kirk



A drawing by a Sri Lankan child shows the trauma of what he experienced after the tsunami devastated his town of Kahawa, Sri Lanka. About 40,000 Sri Lankans perished.

by Master Sgt. Val Gempis



Mission of mercy

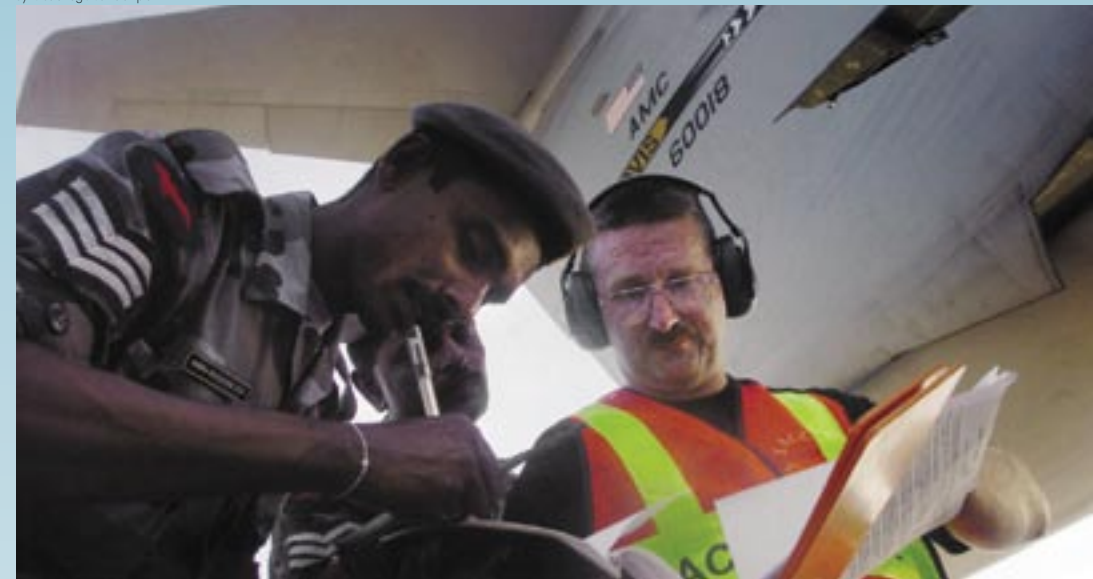
On Sept. 11, 2001, Allison Thompson was on the ground floor of one of the World Trade Center towers when two civilian jet airliners slammed into the buildings. Being a Red Cross nurse, and uninjured, she began administering aid during what would later be described as the worst terrorist strike in history. Seemingly out of nowhere, another nurse began helping her tend to the dying and

That partnership extended to Banda Aceh, Indonesia, where the men and women of the 353rd Special Operations Group, based in Langkawi, Malaysia, worked 16-hour days to lessen the suffering there. On a single mission, the 1st Special Operations Squadron carried 10 doctors from Portugal with tons of medical equipment, two mobile water purification trailers from Spain and an enthusiastic contingent of disaster response specialists from Mexico. The hardscrabble squad's living conditions quintessentially defined the term "remote." Tent-life would be a step up in the rural Indonesian town where the dead outnumbered the living. The troops slept on cots with mosquito nets on the tarmac, a mere 75 yards from where cargo planes maneuvered. The noise and commotion occurred

wounded. The nurse was from Sri Lanka. On Dec. 26, 2004, a tsunami crashed into Sri Lanka. It caused devastation the likes the world has never seen. Like the rest of the world, Nurse Thompson watched the horror unfold on television. Unlike most, she flew immediately to Sri Lanka. It was time to repay a debt. With a bandana scarf around her head, she looked disheveled and overwhelmed. Although it had been more than three weeks since the disaster, many people were still shell-shocked. One elderly woman stared at nothing, lost in thought for minutes at a time. Kahawa was one of the worse

round-the-clock and the physical demands were endless. On Jan. 10, the children of Banda Aceh returned to school, but it wasn't the same school they remembered. There were fewer students. In many instances, only half a class returned. "The moment we fail to react to others in need, we cease to be human," said Lt. Col. Rick Samuels, the Air Force Special Operations component commander. Compassion continues to come in the way of forklifts, trailers, heavy equipment and more from Air Force bases around the world. Sri Lankan fishermen, often the poorest on the island, are slowly recovering. The tsunami destroyed more than 70 percent of the island's fishing boats. Some boats are still located in the middle of villages, overturned and damaged. Today, islanders eye the ocean suspiciously.

by Master Sgt. Val Gempis



Tech. Sgt. Ed Smith (right), a member of the Pacific Air Force Tactical Airlift Control Element, with Sri Lankan Air Force Sergeant's Y.M. Premaratna (left) and S. Bandara Ekanayaka, check the cargo manifest on a C-5 "Galaxy" from the 60th Airlift Wing, Travis Air Force Base, Calif. Sergeant Smith is based at Yokota Air Base, Japan.

The ocean no longer brings peace of mind. It's now something to be feared. 🐉

Master Sgt. Michael Farris, 33rd Special Operations Group contributed to this story

hit villages on the south side. Not only did the tsunami wash away 90 percent of the village, but it also demolished a commuter train there. All but one of the 1,500 people on board died. Bodies were strewn everywhere. With no immediate help, the villagers didn't know what to do. So they buried the bodies in a mass grave across the road. But they couldn't bury what they had seen or the screams they had heard. "It's only been the last couple days that people have been coming around," Nurse Thompson said during the third week of the humanitarian operation. She said aid was slow in coming to Kahawa. The children needed water

and medicine. It seemed the eastern coast, the worst hit area on the island, was getting the bulk of attention. The Air Force was using rescue helicopters to shuttle food throughout the island, while cargo aircraft flew in relief supplies. The Marines were helping clear debris, and the Navy was hauling in heavy machinery, but aid had yet to reach this particular village. The first aid to reach the village came in the way of a Navy water truck. Since salt water had contaminated the village well, the fresh water was a welcomed sight. The children, ever resilient, laughed and drank deeply from the truck's spigot. There were about 800 children at Kahawa. Nearly all of them were

homeless. Many didn't have parents or grandparents. Nurse Thompson gave them crayons and paper and used art as an emotional outlet. The children drew dead bodies in waves. They depicted dying and wounded villagers on land. An overturned train dominated many of the pictures. They described what was in their pictures in matter-of-fact type tones. Unemotional. Detached. It was as if they weren't really there. But they were there. As was nurse Thompson, who was repaying a debt incurred on Sept. 11, 2001. —Master Sgt. Orville F. Desjarlais Jr.